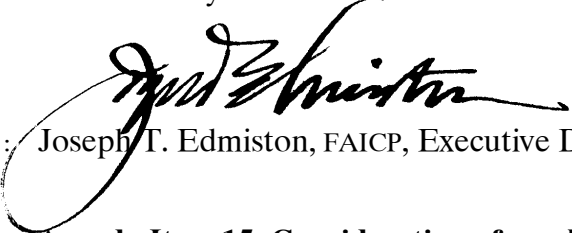


Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: June 20, 2005

From : 
Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 15: Consideration of resolution amending Resolution No. 05-09 to authorize a non-profit grant to the South Coast Wildlands Project for preparation of the Santa Monica-Sierra Madre Linkage Protection Plan, unincorporated Los Angeles County.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing an interagency transfer agreement of Proposition 40 funds in an amount not to exceed \$30,000 to the California Department of Parks and Recreation to fund the South Coast Wildlands Project's preparation of a parcel specific habitat linkage acquisition plan for the Sierra Madre to Santa Monica Mountains Linkage located in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties.

Legislative Authority: Section 33204(c) of the Public Resources Code and Section 33203 which reads (in part) as follows:

The conservancy may coordinate with the Department of Parks and Recreation any acquisition with park and recreation development potential and may contract with the Department of Parks and Recreation as necessary to do so.

Background: In 2001, the South Coast Wildlands Project (SCWP) released its landmark study, entitled, *Missing Linkages*. The study describes dozens of critical regional habitat linkages in the South Coast Ecoregion which extends from the Tehachapi Mountains to the Mexican border. Subsequent analysis identified the 15 most endangered linkages in the region. Since that time, the SCWP has begun to systematically prepare detailed linkage reports on these 15 linkages. Much of the work done by SCWP was funded by grants from the Resources Agency. Several of the subject reports are completed and can be downloaded on the SCWP website (scwildlands.org). In some cases related linkages are combined into a single report. *A Linkage Design for the San Gabriel - Castaic Connection* is completed. It covers the connection between the San Gabriel Mountains northward across the upper Santa Clara River watershed (Soledad Canyon) to the portions of the Angeles National Forest east of Interstate 5. The methodology, results, and conservation value of the documents is first rate.

Staff, The Nature Conservancy, and other agencies have greatly documented most of the linkage connections between the Santa Monica Mountains, the Simi Hills and the Santa Susana Mountains. The *Missing Linkages* report addresses this multi-mountain range linkage as the Sierra Madre to Santa Monica Mountains Linkage and ties the three southern ranges into the Sierra Madre Mountains north of Highway 126 and the Santa Clara River. In some cases that documentation is parcel specific such as along the 101 Freeway between the Simi Hills and the Santa Monica Mountains and along the 118 Freeway in the Santa Susana Pass. Caltrans also recently completed (2004) an in depth study of habitat linkages across the 118 Freeway between the Santa Susana Mountains and the Simi Hills. Likewise Caltrans is contemplating long range plans for new and enhanced freeway crossing structures along the relevant portions of the 118 and 101 Freeways.

The Conservancy's adopted Acquisition Workprogram includes all of the subject Sierra Madre to Santa Monica Mountains Linkage except for areas west of Lake Piru in the Sierra Madre Mountains and west of Happy Camp Canyon Park in the Santa Susana Mountains. It is critical to both the interests of the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the Conservancy to protect adequate lands in this overall linkage to ensure the long term ecological viability of over 40,000 acres of State Park property in the Santa Monica Mountains and the majority of the Santa Monica Mountains Zone, respectively. With limited capital outlay funding left for either agency, it is vital that a few strategic land acquisitions be made to keep the linkage functional. Likewise it is of great importance for both agencies to understand where less than fee acquisitions or developer dedications could accomplish adequate linkage protection.

SCWP has already done substantial work on the Sierra Madre to Santa Monica Mountains Linkage. This work also includes individual species suitability analyses overseen by top experts for each target species. SCWP also has extensive GIS capability. With development rapidly squeezing the subject linkage from all sides, the preparation of a minimum acquisition needs priority parcel report is essential for both agencies to accomplish adequate strategic protection. SCWP is uniquely suited to accomplish this work in a short time frame. The proposed strategic parcel acquisition plan would lead directly to acquisitions in the linkage using Proposition 40 and or Proposition 50 funding. In addition it would lead to the acquisition of conservation easements and fee simple interest in land resources via the donation or dedication of property.

Piru and San Martinez Grande Canyons to Newhall Land and Farming Focus Area

The proposed acquisition report will identify an ecologically functional minimum width chain of contiguous parcels in the critical gap between the Los Padres National Forest at Lake Piru and properties owned by Newhall Land and Farming on south side of Santa Clara River. This project is called Santa Clara River Wildlife Corridor on the Conservancy's Workprogram. It

was ranked in the top 22 projects when priority rankings were done in 2000. It also includes the Castatic-Hathaway Ranch project. It will determine whether to concentrate acquisition efforts around the Piru Creek undercrossing of Highway 126, two unnamed crossings to the east, or the San Martinez Grande canyon undercrossing. The report will also determine the minimum necessary parcels located north of Newhall Land and Farming parcels in upper San Martinez Grande Canyon to tie into the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority's 350-acre holding just over the watershed boundary in the Piru drainage.

Happy Camp Canyon to the Santa Clara River Focus Area

The proposed acquisition report will identify an ecologically functional, minimum width chain of contiguous parcels in the critical gap between Happy Camp Canyon Park and the Santa Clara River. This project is called the Santa Susana North Slope - Newhall Ventura on the Conservancy's adopted Acquisition Workprogram. It is anticipated that much of the 12,000-plus acres owned by Newhall Land and Farming at a minimum will one day be dedicated open space. However, the transition area along the Santa Clara River at northern Workprogram project boundary contains critical small ownerships. A few of these key small ownerships must be identified for acquisition.

Newhall Land and Farming Dedication to Browns-Devil Canyon Focus Area

The proposed report will identify an ecologically functional, minimum width chain of contiguous parcels in the critical gap between the pending Newhall Land and Farming open space dedication in the Ventura and Los Angeles County portions of the Santa Clara River drainage and Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority's 7,500-acre parkland block in the Browns-Devil Canyon watershed. The key parcels to connect these two large core habitats of the Santa Susana Mountains will be determined. Pico-Salt Canyons-Upper, Towsley Canyon-Upper, Towsley Canyon-Upper-Tash, Cocky Bull Ranch, and Oat Mountain-Upper Southface,

Alamos Canyon to Tierra Rejada Valley Focus Area

The proposed report will identify an ecologically functional, minimum width chain of contiguous parcels in the critical gap between Happy Camp Canyon Park and the 118 Freeway and southward from the freeway to Olsen Road at the south end of the Tierra Rejada Valley. That effort will maximize the use of existing protected land whether it is in fee or deed restricted. The focus area includes the following projects on the Conservancy's Acquisition Workprogram: Alamos Canyon Lower, Big Mountain/Happy Camp Additions, Moorpark Hidden Creek Ranch, Tierra Rejada Road to Alamos Canyon, and Tierra Rejada Road to Olsen Road.

State Parks and Conservancy Cooperation

Both the Conservancy and the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR) are integral advisory agencies to the South Coast Wildlands Project. At a recent Linkage Partners meeting hosted by SCWP, CDPR officials expressed an interest in funding SCWP to complete several of the linkage reports that directly affect, and would benefit, several key elements of the State Park System. The discussion led to a proposal for CDPR and the Conservancy to jointly fund completion of the Sierra Madre - Santa Monica Mountains and the Sierra Madre West - Sierra Madre East linkage reports.

The most expeditious means of funding SCWP to prepare the linkage reports appears to be through an interagency transfer agreement with State Parks. It is efficient for SCWP also to work through one funding source. At the time of preparing this report, State Parks staff was not able to assure our staff of the feasibility of this proposal. It is expected that the solidity of the proposed funding mechanism will be known by the evening of the Conservancy meeting. The other option is approve a non-profit grant at a later meeting. The downside of that option is a minimum of several months delay to obtain approval from the Attorney General's office and the Department of Finance. The cost of a linkage report with a full parcel level analysis as described in this report is \$30,000 or a small sum less to be negotiated. SCWP has stated that they can complete the described report no later than the early fall of 2005.